

I got just one question: How do we get away with wearing no pants in these cartoons? – Donald to Daffy

Duck Button

by Thorin N. Tatge

On my way to work, just ahead of the Emerson Avenue bridge, there's a wall made of big bricks painted yellow and gray with a button sticking out of it. It's red, with eye-catching letters that hug the rim, and they say:

PERMANENTLY TURN INTO A DUCK

It's not covered. Nothing to stop a person pressing it. I've never seen anyone around to ask about it, and I certainly never saw anyone push it, but I've thought about pushing it myself. Just in case it somehow really does what it says, though, I haven't. I don't want to be a duck. I tried looking for a door into the building once, but it looks like the entrance is on the other side of Roebuck and I'd have to cross a big parking lot and take a bunch of stairs, so I haven't bothered.

***** Later:*****

Saw a woman press the button today. It was raining and I think her umbrella wasn't working right. She was dressed all in browns and whites, and that was the color of duck she turned into. Before, she was thrashing around with anger about the umbrella—afterwards, she didn't seem angry, but what do I know about angry ducks? She dragged her coat and purse along with her, but left the umbrella.

I would've taken it after she left, but I don't know the rules to this sort of thing.

***** Later:*****

The Johnson-Milne building next to mine finally reopened this week, and now the Emerson Avenue bridge has crowds at eight-thirty. I see people push the button a lot now. Maybe one in fifty. They turn into ducks and keep on walking—usually without breaking stride, even though the new stride isn't anything like the old. Sometimes they don't even look at the button as they push it. I never hear anyone talk after they push the button, but I don't know for sure they can't. They don't quack either, and it's not like there's a lot of chatter in this part of the city anyway. But whenever there's a pair of people talking and one of them pushes the button, the conversation stops dead.

***** Later:*****

Tried talking to one of the ducks today. Don't know what came over me—guess I was just feeling bold. “Hi—you know where a guy can get a good hot dog around here?” I already know where to get a hot dog—just needed something to say. But the duck gave me a funny look and edged away. It didn't seem afraid—just distracted. What's going on in a duck's life to distract it?

***** Later:*****

It's been rough since the ordeal, but my application finally came through and I was able to semi-retire down to point four. I haven't worked here for years, but I keep straying back this way, now that I've got the time. They keep the streets neat and I like the vendors, but really I think it's the button I'm drawn to. I sit on the wall and watch the people going by. I think it's up to one in ten who pushes it, out of those who bother to walk by.

The funny thing is, I haven't seen any ducks showing up in the workplace yet. Or heard about equal pay for ducks, or seen anything about it in the news. Seems like the sort of thing they'd run a feature on. Could sell a bunch of papers.

Maybe they just figure everyone already knows about it. You don't report on what's common knowledge, right? “LEMONADE TASTES SWEET; COFFEE IS BITTER.” Well, I guess that might be it, but still. Strange not to hear anyone talking about it.

The other funny thing is, the ducks always drag their attaché cases and handbags along with them, even if they're barely big enough to handle them anymore. Not sure what someone would want with their old trappings once they're a duck.

***** Later:*****

There aren't that many duck species around here, but the folks that push the button become all kinds. Feathery, colorful, plain. I got a book on duck identification and tried to work it out. There's wood ducks, pintails, shovelers, and a bunch more I couldn't identify on top of the ordinary mallards. Best one was a mandarin with its big colors and little bill. There're domestic breeds too, like Pekins and Pomeranians. I tried to figure if there's a connection between the way someone looks and the kind of duck they turn into. Best I can tell, though, the biggest factor is what clothes you're wearing. Sometimes I'm not even sure about that.

***** Later:*****

Finally found where all the ducks have been working. It's just a place. There are buttons all up and down the hallways: PERMANENTLY TURN INTO A PILE OF JELLY. PERMANENTLY TURN INTO A RADISH. PERMANENTLY TURN INTO A FERRULE. I looked it up—that's the metal ring that holds the eraser on a pencil. With all these terrible buttons tempting you every day, I can see why you might press the duck one. It's permanent. Once you're a duck, none of the other buttons can affect you even if you do give in and press one.

***** Later.*****

The older I get, the more I think about that word "PERMANENTLY." Does that really mean what it says? Really? Don't ducks die and decompose, like the rest of us? And if so, is it really permanent?

I asked around about it. Seems like no one ever sees the ducks die.

***** Later.*****

All my joints are torture. It's terrible just to move. The pills help, but I never feel totally relaxed except when I'm on the bridge. I've been watching to see if old people turn into old ducks. I think they do, unfortunately. But even an old duck is still something. If this button really does make you permanently into a duck, then that's a kind of immortality. Unless a dead duck still counts as a duck.

Would that mean my corpse would never decay? I mean, even that's something. They say entropy makes everything fall apart. So if I pressed it and died anyway, would I be flipping a big old bird to the laws of physics? No pun intended.

I should press it. I know I should. Just gotta set my affairs in order first. But do I really need to? I'll still be around. Maybe even more than ever.

Should probably draw up a living will, though, just in case.

***** Later.*****

Well, I'm a duck now. Some kind of mallard. Can't read the words in the book anymore, but I think I might be a Swedish Blue. My joints still hurt, but I'd like to think at least they're not getting any worse.

I tried going down to the river and dabbling for snails, but it turns out it's hard being an old duck. No snails, just bulrush and smartweed. I'd been hoping to avoid it, but I wound up just working in the factory with the other ducks.

***** Later.*****

Been working here a while now. My bosses are all ducks, too. I was thinking I might meet the secret puppeteers behind all this, but nope—looks like it's ducks all the way up.

It turns out this is where all the buttons get made. "PERMANENTLY TURN INTO A..." You name it. No two alike. They trained me in on the machines that make the casings. No words, just a lot of quacking and gestures. Someday maybe I'll get a promotion and start working on the stuff that goes inside, under the buttons.

Wonder if other cities have factories run by ducks too, or if their factories are run by whatever their buttons turn the people into. Far as I know, we've got the only duck button here in our city.

Most of the things these buttons turn a person into are pretty much the pits. But some seem like they'd be pretty okay. I saw "MOGUL" go by once. Wouldn't mind being a mogul. Or "STAR." Not sure if it meant the things in the sky or the celebrities, but either way I might want to try it out.

Can't, though. Once you're permanently one thing, you can't ever become something else. Kinda makes me wish I hadn't pushed that duck button. Then again, there's no guarantee I ever would've run into a better button. These things get shipped out all over the world, after all. No one place gets more than one or two.

The work's not too bad. I wonder when my life's going to change again.

THE END

I read this several times before I decided to publish it. The writing is a bit crude, the story line jittery, the logic of the piece beyond me. Something about it, though, appealed to my sense of wonder. I keep picturing the author as a good-sized, brown mallard, pecking away at a keyboard with his broad, fat duck's bill. The absurdity of it smacks of another realm and belongs here if it belongs anywhere. My thanks to Mr. Tatge for an entertaining debut story. --GAM